



New Trends
in Psychology

Pittard and “Race”: The Psychoanthropological Problem of Mediating Past and Present in Lens of Epistemic Growth

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Abstract: During Pittard’s lifetime, Social Darwinism was a mainstream idea in science and there have been quite a few researchers that tried to scientize racism. It is unsurprising that Pittard also uses the term race and regards it as a scientific term in a zoological manner, nonetheless, it is outstanding that he already critically reflects this term and rejects the idea of racial purism. Nonetheless, his works can be considered politically incorrect through today’s lenses and politically incorrect works are put into question as being legitimate study objects by cancel culture. The author of this paper, however, emphasizes that cancelling Pittard’s works simply because of the use of pseudo-scientific concepts such as race is rather problematic. He argues in two ways. First, he points out that Pittard’s interpretation of the word was already quite progressive for his times, while it is unfair to use today’s knowledge on racism to evaluate a historical source who could not have today’s knowledge, and second, cancelling politically incorrect works make the injustices of the past invisible. As such, cancel culture is counter-productive for epistemic growth. It ends a dialogue rather than beginning it making a critical engagement with its content impossible.

Keywords: political correctness; cancel culture; Pittard; racism

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1. Introduction

Eugène Pittard was an important anthropologist who laid ground for us to understand the ethnic complexities of the Balkans from a historical lens. Through the documentation of the different ethnic groups in the Balkan, we have a living testimony of different aspects of life in early 20th century southeastern Europe. Most notably are to mention his works on Romania and Dobrudja in particular. On the other hand, Pittard lived in a complex times, not only for anthropologists. Anyways, it was quite common for anthropologists to do “racial studies”, something which is rightfully rejected today as pseudo-science. In these regards, it is also important to evaluate whether dealing with Pittard’s works today is an indirect legitimization of his racism, and thus, ought to be banned from universities or whether this kind of cancel culture is rather counterproductive. Methodologically, we will use two steps. The first step is a general outlook of Pittard’s time; however, this is not done by making a timeline of anthropologist thought, since such a broad overview would go astray. Instead, we take a case study which exemplifies how widespread racist anti-humanist tendencies were in science at that time. Even though it’s just one example, it still shows how widespread the phenomenon was. As an example, we use the *Buletin eugenic și biopolitic* which we have looked through and analyzed. It turns out that for an exemplification, it is enough to look into the first issue, since one of the editors starts the issue with defining the subject of “research”¹. In a second step, we will deal with Pittard and political correctness. Methodologically, this will be done in three steps. First, we will have to take a look on Pittard’s intention and point out why he likes to research Romania and Dobrudja in particular to be able to understand his aim. Second, we have to see the issue of problematic language through the lens of the term “race”. Given the fact that Pittard uses this term, we need to ask whether Pittard reflects this term critically himself or takes it for granted. In a final step, we have to ask how to deal with literature using difficult terms to day. This will be done by taking the concepts of political correctness and cancel culture into account.

2. When Social Darwinism and Racism was considered science

During Pittard’s lifetime, Social Darwinism was not just a trend but even considered scientific. As such, there have been anthropologists and ethnologists which tried to

² Nonetheless, we motivate other researchers to analyze further issues, since this bulletin is hardly discussed so far, despite being a blueprint for the gruesome field of eugenics.

scientificize racism. In 1927, the *Buletin eugenic și biopolitic* was first published, a journal which claimed to be scientific and which defended eugenics. We want to point out clearly that we reject both eugenic as a scientific paradigm – it is clearly not science – and the practice itself. Nevertheless, in order to gain an understanding of ideas that were commonly accepted during Pittard's lifetime, this journal serves as a particularly illustrative historical example. For this paper, we looked into the journal itself, using it as primary source, instead on relying on secondary sources about eugenics. In this journal, I. Moldovan defines eugenics as follows: "Eugenics is a recent phenomenon, defined by its creator, the English researcher Galton, as the science that deals with factors that can modify for better or worse the racial qualities — mental or physical — of future generations. The goal of eugenics is the qualitative improvement of the race" (1927, p. 3; translation mine, with assistance from Google Translate). This definition clearly shows the belief at that time that there is not a human pluralism. Instead, plurality was reduced to the assumption of several distinct "races." Moldovan assumes that there exist identifiable factors capable of "improving" the quality of a "race." This perspective becomes even clearer when Moldovan states: "Eugenics deals exclusively with hereditary qualities, which are therefore passed on from parents to children and is not interested in other qualities due to the influence of the physical and social environment" (ibid.; translation mine, with assistance from Google Translate). The author is obviously interested in natural selection in regards with "race", a crossover of Darwinian theory with racial categories accepted in social anthropology at that time, while he does not take social and enviornmental factors into account. This is further illustrated by Moldovan's discussion of negative and positive eugenics: "The measures of negative eugenics are the prevention of harm to the future generation through diseases and intoxications (venereal diseases, alcoholism, etc.) and the elimination from procreation of imbecile, criminal individuals, or those suffering from other hereditary diseases or defects, and in its positive part it tries to facilitate the procreation of individuals with normal or superior psychic and physical qualities." (ibid.; translation mine, with assistance from Google Translate). We can see here clearly how Moldovan racializes people and how he transgresses their human dignity and individual rights. Just for compelteness' sake, this does not mean that there are no limits to Moldovan. He makes clear that he does not see eugenics as a field without rules. Moldovan makes for instance clear that eugenics does not aim to restore natural selection in a "primitive way" nor to improve humanity through animal-breeding methods like forcibly selecting and pairing people. Though he does not deny that some people go

so far to agree to such claims, he rejects them and regards it to be unfair to dismiss the entire field of eugenics just because of those who do not accept the boundaries which Moldovan recounts (ibid.). Anyways, we argue that even eugenics with boundaries has to be rejected from a contemporary perspective, since it works on false premises, including biological and normative judgments which do not uphold with today's scientific standards.

3. An Hommage to Romania and the Problem of "Races"

First and foremost, it is important to make clear that Pittard has a positive affection towards Romania: He writes his book out of sympathy for Romania (Pittard, 1917, p. 7). So the goal of his book is to treasure Romanian culture. He notes straight from the beginning that his project is not designated to be a geographic book nor a historical one nor an anthropological or ethnological one nor a travel report (Pittard, 1917, p. 7 ff.). Though his motivations and intentions are made clear, we cannot, but come to the conclusion today, that his work fulfills all the criteria which he intended not to cover in depth. It is a geographical, historical, anthropological and ethnographical testimony and the broad field of subjects covered in fact make it so valuable. Funnily, the actual intention which Pittard has in mind is less noble: He explains that he already wrote about Romania's "races" (Pittard, 1917, p. 8) and though he does not speak it out again, it seems that he has this in mind as actual intention: informing about "races". It is interesting that Pittard puts the name "race" in quotation marks himself, so we must ask whether he already sees the term to be inappropriate in a certain manner. Pittard himself stated in 1902: "The term of race is used in the common geographical sense: Romanians, Tartars, Turkish, Armenians, Bulgarians, Kurdish, Gypsies, Jewish, etc., who are living together" (cit. after Popescu-Spineni, 2015, p. 158). Obviously, Pittard names as race what we call ethnicity today. Here, he does not use the traditional terminology that was used in the racist and pseudo-scientific "racial studies". In his 1926 work *Race and History*, he even argues against the concept of pure races in Europe, and thus, denies the classical racial theory which was still common in Europe at that time. He states in his chapter "The Classification of Human races" that "it must be assumed from this that every modification in a civilization is always and everywhere marked by some new ethnic contribution" (Pittard, 1927, p. 31). In this particular work, he gives the following notion on the term race: "In current – even in scientific – speech, the word *race* has been singularly twisted out of its proper signification. Race must not be

confounded with language or nationality. There exists no such thing as a 'Latin Race', a 'Germanic Race' or a 'Slavonic Race' (Pittard, 1927, p. 31). Nonetheless, this obviously progressive stance ought not to be outweighed. Pittard believes in the existence of races and he does not use it in a race-critical way. This comes becomes even more clearer, when he says: "race is a zoological, language a social fact" (Pittard, 1927, p. 31). And this is what makes working with Pittard so tricky: Obviously, since he does not follow the traditional understanding of races but uses a (for his time certainly) more progressive point of view, his observations are valuable, since they give ethnographic insights which are useful for ethnologists and social anthropologists; on the other hand, his view on humanity is a kind sinister one, as he classifies human beings into zoological categories, something which has proven unscientific and which is rightfully rejected today.

4. An Inquisition of Cancel Culture?

We can see through the above mentioned examples that Pittard could cause a controversy, because using his language careless without any reflection feels wrong. One could argue that since it is primarily caused by a feeling, we do not necessarily need to bother: academia does not deal with feelings, it deals with facts. But still we might ask: Does the feeling a wrongness in his language actually align with the fact that his language is wrong. Obviously, we already showed that he uses terms which appear in a very problematic context, such as the term "race". Not ignoring our feeling in this regard is meaningful insofar, as we might transgress the boundary of the marginalized, i.e. of those who were stigmatized through race-concepts and who suffered. In other words: We feel bad to use it, because others who made a painful experience feel bad about it. As a result, we use mindful language in respect of others. Generally, this is known as being politically correct: "Political correctness [...] is the attempt to establish norms of speech (or sometimes behavior) that are thought to (a) protect vulnerable, marginalized or historically victimized groups, and which (b) function by shaping public discourse, often by inhibiting speech or other forms of social signaling, and that (c) are supposed to avoid insult and outrage, a lowered sense of self-esteem, or otherwise offending the sensibilities of such groups or their allies" (Moller, 2016, p. 1). On the other hand, "Political correctness is dismissed by its opponents as if it were either a bizarre and trivial insistence on redefining words, or else an insidious attempt to advance an ideology by silencing the competition" (Moller, 2016, p. 6). In other words: The claim of political

correctness can also be used to censor the political enemy by tabooing his speech and through it his concerns. It is a drastic infringement on the right to free speech and the ability to freely express one's opinion. Strict regulation of language leads to regulation of discourse and therefore has an authoritarian aspect. This causes a clear dilemma: the protection of marginalized or insulted groups *versus* the right to free articulation and the freedom of discourse. The paradox of the first cannot be overlooked: For ensuring the freedom of the unprotected, freedom in general is restricted. A ban of something is therefore actually supposed to lead to more freedom. In the first place, it means that we acknowledge that actual threats for freedom exist and that only through a normative approach, the freedom of the whole society can be ensured: "By maintaining the norms, we acknowledge that such threats exist and that it is important to us collectively to signal to new entrants into public discourse that they must observe the norms carved out to protect the status of groups potentially under threat" (Moller, 2016, p. 8). But the other side cannot be ignored either: it is the trojan horse to censor discourses and to destroy what it actually wants to uphold: democracy. The second thing is the question of how we should act if we find an instance in which something is not politically correct. In this case, Pittard's wording, such as the term "race" is not politically correct, since it is universally acknowledged today that races do not exist and that the term thus is not a scientific category. But what does it mean as a result? Is it legitimate to ban someone from the discourse who is not politically correct (or in other instances to be perceived of not being politically correct)? This phenomenon is known as cancel culture. "Cancel culture is a phenomenon where individuals transgressing norms are called out and ostracised on social media and other venues by members of the public" (Saint-Louis, 2021). The problem of transgression of norms has to be seen from two sides: a religious and a secular. Religions usually call a transgression of a norm or commandment "sin". By definition, a sin is the transgression of a divine law, which leads to a person's separation from God. In other words, sin is what God does not want. Since humans are inherently fallible, and in Christianity man is even considered a fallen being, he will never act without error and will therefore sin, even if he tries to respect God's laws. In a secular sphere, we are no longer subject to God's will; society assumes a controlling function. This is, of course, not without its problems, because: Who is society? Who determines public discourse? Sometimes people are publicly shamed for acting contrary to the moral standards of a social group, even though the individual being criticized has not actually committed any illegal act. From a legal perspective, there is nothing wrong with this; rather, the individual has defied the constantly evolving, but not yet codified, moral standards

of an abstract, not always definable entity, group, or internet mob. Morality has thus become fluid, which naturally grants people certain freedoms, since they no longer have to listen to the authority of a particular church but can regularly elect a new government. At the same time, they face a significant lack of freedom because the field is now dominated not by the state but by civil society actors. The church has been replaced in the former church-state relationship.

The problem remains the same, however. No one is perfect. This means that everyone crosses someone else's boundaries at some point in their life. Usually, this is done without malicious intent. And that's why people forgive each other. In some cases, however, someone else's mistake becomes public, which then leads to public criticism of the error. Sometimes this can be important: for example, in the case of a public figure. A politician who is corrupt must, of course, face public criticism. Society can also ask whether something can already be considered morally corrupt, even if the legal boundary hasn't yet been crossed. The choice of words by a politician, who after all represents his people, can and should be reviewed, as he must also ensure that marginalized groups under his care are protected. However, it becomes problematic when one wants to remove people from public life or boycott them because of a transgression. At this moment, the discourse is no longer being conducted, but rather it is being ended. Since everyone has hurt someone else at some point, the question arises as to what extent people should morally elevate themselves to remove others from the public eye, when one can find some flaw in every person that can be used as a pretext to end the discourse.

Now, one can argue that "cancel culture and cancellation are unequal" (St-Louis, 2021). While activists might demand to cancel someone, "Organisations, such as employers, boards or directors, and state authorities are the only one who can sanction an individual" (St-Louis, 2021). However, the cancellation is usually the results of a pressure by activists who threaten (i.e. through a demand of boycott) the organization (such as a tv station, employer, etc.) to take an action and sanction the person. Anyone who is giving the person which ought to be canceled a room for expression has to fear to become a target oneself. Since, as mentioned, nobody is infallible and may make mistakes in their interactions, social exclusion as a result of cancellation is a danger that can potentially affect everyone. The attempt to cancel someone is itself morally reprehensible, as it infringes on the freedom of the person being canceled. Instead of engaging with arguments, debating, or offering a thought-provoking perspective, exclusion leads to a restriction of the right to free speech, even if that opinion is considered politically incorrect by some, and creates echo

chambers where radical, anti-democratic forces thrive, suppressing any dissent through exclusion. The free society is thus abolishing itself. Social spaces are not becoming freer, safer, or more inclusive; rather, more and more people are withdrawing from public debate, out of fear of becoming a victim of cancel culture themselves if they show solidarity with the “wrong” people, or out of fear of saying something “wrong”. This is not an abstract fear, but already a reality: A majority of Germans, for example, feel that they can no longer freely express their opinions. Or in other words: Only 46% of Germans still believe that they can express their opinions freely (Welt, 2025). Many are therefore withdrawing from public discourse.

5. A Reason to Disengage?

Furthermore, cancel culture does not only target contemporary figures, but also historical figures are not spared. For instance, students at University of Wisconsin-Madison demanded the removal of a statue of Abraham Lincoln (Gerstman, 2020). And this is just one out of many examples. The problem with historical personalities is that they cannot defend themselves anymore. We do not only speak against cancellation of contemporary people, as we think that this undermines democracy, but we also think that cancelling historical people is not helpful, but out of a different reason. We want to make an example with another writer than Pittard first: Malian historian Ibrahima Baba Kaké has written several volumes on African history in 1977. In volume 1 he gives an overview of who are the people who inhabit Africa. By doing so, he uses terms such as “Caucasoid” and “Mongoloid” – terms which come from classical racial theory and which are completely unscientific. Obviously, Kaké enjoyed a classical education which was dominated by the Western stereotypes which were common in the 1950s and 1960s. He took these as granted, yet, it would be completely ignorant to cancel him just because he uses a problematic terminology. We would miss to give an African intellectual a voice on African history, since the volume also has many, many valuable insights. Thus, we have to see the writer in his time period. The same applies to Pittard: ignoring his contributions would be intellectually negligent, as his documentations remain highly valuable. Anyways, he has to be read critically – like every other author as well. During Pittard’s time, Social Darwinism was a dominant scientific paradigm, and it would be anachronistic to hold him morally accountable for drawing on elements of these theories. He simply did not have the knowledge we have today, thus, we cannot assume that he could have known it better. Thus, the postcolonial progress we witness today is only

possible because colonial arguments have been critically analyzed and systematically deconstructed. Through this process, we have come to understand the structures by which colonialism suppressed indigenous populations, how human beings were marginalized based on outward appearance, and how categories such as “pure” and “impure” were instrumentalized to sustain social hierarchies that legitimized colonial power. If we erase authors who reproduced these images simply because they were mainstream and considered legitimate at the time, we risk foreclosing epistemic growth. Without these texts, past social structures become increasingly opaque, and historical injustices risk becoming invisible. Engaging critically with the works of scientists such as the anthropologist Eugène Pittard allows us to preserve the memory of these injustices while simultaneously distinguishing between his pseudoscientific racial assumptions and his valuable scientific contributions. In doing so, we can learn from the limitations of his thought as well as from those of his ideas that were already progressive for their time, even if they fall short of contemporary critical standards.

Yet, we have to ask ourselves: Are there reasons which justify a disengagement with an author, so to say, that simply disqualify him? A global reading argument could be: “for there to be epistemic reasons to disengage, an academic’s moral transgression needs to defeat the positive epistemic status of the audience’s positive epistemic attitude towards p (gained from Ac’s testimony). [...] Such defeat was possible if the moral transgression provided evidence that the academic in question lacks the competence necessary in their area” (Bastian, 2025, p. 14). For example, in the case of a philosopher: “The global reading sees moral transgressions as the kind of behaviour that is incompatible with being a good philosopher, since one lacks a competence that is required for doing good philosophy” (Bastian, 2025, p. 14). The problem however, is that “the global reading will strike many as too strong. For example, is it really the case that a logician’s transphobia is evidence that they lack the competence of carrying out rigorous proofs? Could we not engage with their contributions in the field of logic, while condemning their claims concerning ethics or metaphysics?” (Bastian, 2025, p. 15) This is a broader argument in which we can argue to disengage with certain parts of an author’s work, while not fully disengaging with the author in general. Furthermore, though there might be reasons to disengage, it does not mean as a conclusion that we ought to disengage: “the Competence Argument does not issue a binary requirement to disengage or engage, and could allow for degrees of removal, corresponding to strength of reason. It may also be possible that the purely epistemic reasons in favour of disengaging could be

outweighed altogether by other, weightier reasons against it.” (Bastian, 2025, p. 18). Of course, there could also be other reasons, such as moral reasons which may outweigh the epistemic (Bastian, 2025, p. 18). Yet, I think the epistemic reading shows once again that even if there are moral grounds today which speak against an author, there might be other reasons, such as epistemic ones, which speak for an engagement with the author’s work.

6. So How to Value Pittard?

In fact, we have to be thankful to Pittard, because since World War I, he “had been at the crossroads of an important scientific relationship between Switzerland and Turkey. Among other things, it enabled a contribution to the reform of the Turkish higher education system in the early 1930s and, in this context, also the employment of persecuted scientists from Germany.” (Kieser, 2019, p. 105; translation mine). Pittard gained influence in Turkey and the Balkans by combining academic prestige with a personable, socially engaged approach, as he was considered philanthropic and democratic (cp. Kieser, 2019, p. 106). When he dealt with “races”, his source of inspiration was not one of fear or bewilderment, but the plurality of ethnicities (Kieser, 2019, p. 106). Taking the Competence argument: Is a scholar whose work is driven by empirical curiosity and an openness to factual plurality rather than by an ideological pursuit of purity or the stigmatization of others competent within his discipline? I think he is, since scientific competence on methodological and empirical openness and the willingness to pursue knowledge claims, even when these later prove untenable by contemporary standards. Is a scholar who held democratic convictions and contributed to the protection and inclusion of persecuted scientists morally condemnable in any general sense? I don’t think so. While individual aspects of his work may warrant criticism, such a profile does not justify wholesale moral rejection. Accordingly, there are neither compelling moral reasons nor general epistemic grounds to disengage from or completely dismiss the work of Eugène Pittard.

7. Conclusion

We have seen that political correctness itself is important insofar as it protects marginalized groups and creates safe spaces in the society. On the other hand, political correctness can be misused to target political enemies. This finds its peak

in cancel culture, where those who transgress (alleged) norms are removed out of the public discourse and made invisible. Cancellation is not only problematic for living people who might lose their jobs or income, but also for historical people, though the reasons here are different. The very problem is that we used today's moral convictions and project them on people who lived at a time, where other moral standards existed. In cancelling historical figures, we do not engage in an epistemic growth, but we make past injustices invisible, as the ones who committed them are not discussed anymore. Rather we should analyze how the person positioned himself during his lifetime. With Eugène Pittard, we find a critical mind who had democratic values. Pittard, though seeing "race" as something zoological, he criticized the idea of racial purity. His intention was rather to find out more about ethnic groups, and thus, his term *de facto* often falls together with ethnicity and nationality. Though he does not reject the term "race" he obviously critically reflected it and thus, it would be wrong to disengage with Pittard's works, as we can separate his scientific findings, which are extremely valuable, from pseudo-scientific parts of his work. Obviously, his approach was scientific in nature, as his mission was truth-seeking and not driven by ideology.

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